



# The Cadillac, the mother-in-law, and the ballot: Individual and contextual roots of ambivalence in Swiss direct democracy

Alessandro Nai\*

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, UniMail, Boulevard du Pont-d'Arve 40, CH-1211 Geneva, Switzerland

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 3 April 2012  
Received in revised form 18 June 2013  
Accepted 27 June 2013

### Keywords:

Ambivalence  
Direct democracy  
Switzerland  
Political campaigns  
Multilevel models

## ABSTRACT

Citizens may experience irreconcilable and conflictive values or feelings about a political issue. They may, for instance, both believe in a woman's right to autonomy over her body (*pro choice*) and that human life begins before birth (*pro life*). This conflictive situation – referred to as *ambivalence* in relevant literature – has detrimental effects on political choices. For instance, ambivalence may enhance instability in candidates' evaluations, delay the formation of vote intentions, and finally weaken predictions on vote choices. This being, literature has less looked at what may induce ambivalence, and especially on how informational context may affect it. Our paper aims to compensate for this lack, by assessing under which individual and contextual conditions ambivalence has more chances to be felt by citizens. Through a series of hierarchical estimations based on post-electoral data on Swiss direct democracy and original data retracing content of political campaigns, we will demonstrate that individual determinants (political sophistication, exposure to political campaigns, and heuristics) as well as political campaigning (intensity and negativism) strongly determine the existence of ambivalence.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Ambivalence exists when someone experiences both positive and negative feeling about an issue (Rudolph and Popp, 2007: 563, Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 123 sgg.). With appreciable irony, McGraw et al. (2003: 423) compare ambivalence to “watching your mother-in-law drive over a cliff in your new Cadillac”: facing a surge of conflicting feelings, you hesitate between run to save your midlife crisis purchase or sit down and enjoy the scenic epilogue for the cause of many conjugal struggles.

An established body of literature explores as of today the nature and extent of ambivalent opinions. Major contributions discuss the presence of ambivalence within opinions

concerning issues on abortion or euthanasia (Alvarez and Brehm, 1995, 2002; Steenbergen and Brewer, 2004), social welfare (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Steenbergen and Brewer, 2004), racial and ethnical inequalities (Alvarez and Brehm, 1997) and gay rights (Steenbergen and Brewer, 2004), or simply competing candidates (Lavine, 2001; McGraw et al., 2003). Current literature seems as of today relatively consensual on the fact that ambivalence has detrimental effects on individual behavior. Ambivalence increases instability in candidates' evaluation (Lavine, 2001; Basinger and Lavine, 2005; McGraw et al., 2003), boosts partisan volatility (Keele and Wolak, 2008; Haddock, 2003), “substantially delays the formation of citizens' voting intentions, diminishes the influence of both personality assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluation, and ultimately weakens the prediction of vote choice” (Lavine, 2001: 916). Recent work by Clark et al. (2008) also shows that ambivalence biases the reception and treatment of new

\* Tel.: +41 22 379.8345.

E-mail address: [alessandro.nai@unige.ch](mailto:alessandro.nai@unige.ch).

information, in that ambivalent individuals tend to avoid “disagreeable” information. Ambivalence has furthermore been shown to discourage political involvement and participation (Mutz, 2002).

The same literature has however astonishingly less to say on what may cause ambivalent feelings (but see, e.g., Steenbergen and Brewer, 2004; Rudolph, 2005; Rudolph and Popp, 2007). Furthermore, only little systematic proof exists that what may cause ambivalence comes from different levels simultaneously – Keele and Wolak (2008) being a notable exception. This is precisely the aim of our contribution.

This article explores the roots of ambivalence for Swiss citizens during direct-democratic ballots at the federal level (1999–2005). Following what has been recently done by Keele and Wolak, we will also argue that “while one’s propensity to become ambivalent depends in part on individual characteristics, [...] the occurrence of ambivalence will also depend on the political environment. Political contexts vary. At times, political information is plentiful, while at other times, political information is scarce” (Keele and Wolak, 2008: 655–656). Ambivalence during direct-democratic ballots in Switzerland signals the fact that some citizens agree with arguments supporting one given proposition but support also arguments opposing it (or disagree with both); we believe that such ambivalent opinions depends on individual characteristics (the level of political sophistication, attention to political information, and the use of heuristics during opinion formation) and the nature and context of political campaigns (intensity and negativism). Based on an “operative measure” of ambivalence (Martinez et al., 2012), our empirical analyses will provide strong support for this assumption.

Switzerland, “the only nation in the world where political life truly revolves around the referendum” (Kobach, 1994: 98), constitutes an excellent field for the study of ambivalent opinions. Because of the particular democratic system, Swiss citizens are often asked to express themselves (via a vote) on policy reforms that cover a vast range of issues; issue opinions – logically more likely to be biased by ambivalence, especially in a limited-information setting – are thus at the heart of the political game. Furthermore, the tradition of Swiss post-ballot analyses (VOX) clearly demonstrates that what citizens feel about some major arguments strongly determines their vote choices, hinting that consistency of opinions predicts vote choices. In such a setting, and even if no systematic research exists (yet), it seems therefore safe to postulate that ambivalent opinions matter. But what are their roots?

Our article structures as follows. We will, firstly, briefly introduce the nature and implications of ambivalent opinions and then, secondly, discuss our expectations related to their multilevel roots. The nature of our research design (data, variables and models) is discussed in the third section; the fourth section presents the empirical test, which will provide consistent support to our expectations, before concluding in the last section.

## 2. Ambivalent opinions?

Most citizens “appear not to have ‘just one attitude’ toward political issues” (Zaller, 1992: 54), which implies

that “rather than endorsing one side of a political debate and refuting the other, individuals often embrace central elements of both sides” (Lavine, 2001: 915). As Alvarez and Brehm (1995) clearly show, citizens may, for instance, cherish arguments that embrace a liberal position on abortion (*pro choice*) while strongly supporting arguments that refer to a conservative and religious view on the issue (*pro life*). In literature on psychology of attitudes, this comes from the fact that “sometimes people simultaneously hold evaluative inconsistent beliefs, that is, some beliefs that express positive evaluation and other beliefs that express negative evaluation” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 123).

The idea that citizens may simultaneously experience both positive and negative feelings towards an issue strongly contrasts with the belief that individual attitudes are unidimensional. This vision “assume[s] a tradeoff between the polar opposite ends of evaluative scales. Focusing on the evaluation of presidential candidates, the more positive a person feels about a candidate, the less negative he must be about that candidate. Or, to use another example, the more conservative an individual is on a policy position, the less liberal she must be. This unidimensional perspective on individual attitudes is prevalent in research on political behavior” (Meffert et al., 2004: 63).

A bi-dimensional evaluative space (Meffert et al., 2004) seems therefore more apt to capture the essence of ambivalent opinions: positive and negative attitudes toward an issue (a candidate, a ballot proposition, etc.) may indeed exist simultaneously. The left scheme of Fig. 1 (adapted from Meffert et al., 2004: 65) presents the relationship between opposite attitudes; the descending diagonal (“reciprocity”) represents the unidimensional view of attitudes, where the increasing in favourable attitudes toward an issue leads naturally to a decreasing in unfavourable attitudes towards that same issue. Following this principle, the more we feel positive about a candidate, the less we should experience negative feelings toward him; similarly, the more we agree with a constitutional reform (e.g., through support for a popular initiative), the less we should support arguments opposing it. Strongly contrasting with this postulate, as of today considered as excessively simplistic, the multidimensional approach on attitudes posits that opposite feelings and attitudes can exist simultaneously; this is represented in the left scheme in Fig. 1 with the ascending diagonal (“simultaneity”). The right scheme in Fig. 1 presents four scenarios when negative and positive attitudes come into play. When individuals experience strong positive attitudes toward an issue while experiencing weak negative issues against it, we are in presence of a “positive reciprocity”; a “negative reciprocity” of attitudes exists in the opposite scenario (strong negative attitudes and weak positive attitudes toward an issue). In those two first scenarios, individuals do not experience conflicting attitudes. “Indifference” exists when both positive and negative attitudes are weak; in such a scenario, individuals are simply not that concerned with the issue at stake (Rudolph, 2005). Finally, “ambivalent feelings” exist when individuals experience both strong positive and strong negative attitudes toward an issue.

Ambivalence is often associated in relevant literature to uncertainty and equivocation. Following Alvarez and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1051911>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1051911>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)